

An Interview with Charles Whitman

Interviewed by Harold Oaks on November 8, 2011

Charles Whitman: I was born in Montpelier, Bear Lake County, Idaho, and lived there until I was in the middle of the second grade. My father had previously moved out to the Midwest, so we moved from Montpelier to Dodge City, Kansas, until I was a freshman in high school. I lived in Dodge City; Mexico, Missouri; Cairo, Illinois; and St. Louis, Missouri. Then I moved to live with my grandparents on a farm in a little community north of Marshall, Missouri, called Fairville.

Harold Oaks: Is that where you graduated from high school?

Whitman: No, I graduated from—I guess it would have been junior high school, only they didn't call it that. I was schooled most of that time in a one-room schoolhouse, and I had a fabulous couple of teachers during that period of time. I loved school.

When I left junior high school, when I was ready to go on to high school, I would have had to go into Marshall. Someone would have had to get special permission for me to drive, and my grandparents didn't have a car. I had an uncle who did have a car; they would have arranged it somehow for me. So I could either stay there with them or I could go and live with the folks in Montpelier, Idaho.

Oaks: You had relatives that were still there?

Whitman: My Whitman grandparents were still there, and also my aunt and uncle and some of their children. I had a whole bunch of friends that I hadn't kept in contact with, but they were still there, too.

So I moved back. I can remember sitting in the train and looking out at my grandma and grandpa waving goodbye, and tears were streaming down my face. I wasn't sure that I'd made the right decision. But I moved back to Montpelier, Idaho, and graduated from Montpelier High School. Then I went into the military for four years.

Oaks: What branch of the military?

Whitman: The air force. After I did my basic and stuff, I was stationed fifty miles south of Paris at Fontainebleau, and then a little past that in a town called Avon. I was administrative assistant to the adjutant general for three and a half years. I did a lot of deliveries of secret documents to various individuals. The only important person anyone remembers was Group Captain Townsend, and the only reason he's remembered is because he was the one that one of the queen's sisters wanted to marry, but her parents wouldn't let her. She married somebody else, and then promptly divorced him.

Oaks: Did you learn French when you were in France?

Whitman: To a degree, yes. We could get around in Paris fine, and any place else we wanted to. But I was not fluent.

Oaks: That was during what period of time?

Whitman: I graduated in 1951, I believe, so it would have been '51, '52, '53, '54. I guess I got out in '54, but I'm not absolutely positive about the date.

Oaks: That sounds about right. What next?

Whitman: I went home and had been accepted at Colombia University. I was going to go into the diplomatic core.

Oaks: Because of the experience you'd had in the service?

Whitman: Yes. Actually, the air force tried to keep me in the military. They didn't want me to get out. I had a colonel who was just wild to keep me. But I didn't stay.

When I got home and started figuring out things, I realized that I wasn't going to get enough from the GI Bill to be able to afford to go to Colombia and live in New York City. I went down to BYU on a weekend to visit Ross Armitage, who was my best friend in high school, and I really, really liked the school. It was kind of late to enroll, but I think people were let in a lot easier than they are now.

I went home, and when my folks found out that I was going to go there, they said, "Oh, Charles, any place but that glorified high school."

But the more they tried to talk me out of it, the more I decided, *No, I'm going to go to BYU*. They even got me into the University of Washington, and I was going to live there with some cousins. They did not want me to go to BYU. So I went to BYU.

Oaks: What were you going to major in?

Whitman: I was going to major in languages, I think. I can't remember exactly what my first major was. I took some Spanish classes, but I can't really remember what I did the first semester. I did take an acting class from H. I.—Harold I. Hansen.

Oaks: Really?

Whitman: When the class was through, he said, "If there's anybody who thinks they might want to have a career in theatre, they can talk with me, and I'll tell them very honestly whether I think they have any chance or not."

I bravely went up and said, "Okay, I'm interested."

Oaks: You'd had this one class? You hadn't been in a show yet?

Whitman: I don't know whether I'd been in a show, though probably I had. (I'd have to go back and check.) From then on, every opportunity to be in something, I was in it; whether it was a big part or a small part, it didn't matter.

H. I. said, "Yes, I think you could make it in theatre."

Oaks: You weren't at this time a member of the Church, either?

Whitman: No, I wasn't a member of the Church. I switched my major to theatre—speech and dramatic arts, as it was called at that time. Then I started hearing about the Hill Cumorah Pageant.

I went in to see H. I. and said, "I want to go on this pageant thing. What is it?"

He told me, then said, "The problem is that only members of the Church can participate in the pageant."

I said, "Sure, that's really nice. Thanks so much."

I guess that was the end of the interview; I don't remember the details of it. About a week or so later, he called me and said, "Can you come in to see me?"

I did, and he told me that Jacobsen—who was the mission president; Florence was his wife, but I can't remember his first name—would like to meet me.

I said, "Hmm, okay. When do I do this?"

We went up and President Jacobsen asked me some things, why I wanted to go and so on.

My major thrust was that I wanted the experience of doing an outdoor thing, but I didn't tell him that. I kind of lied. I don't remember what exactly I told him, but it was something like I was maybe interested in the Church, and I thought this would be a good spiritual experience, and so on.

Again there was a waiting period, and then I got a call from Harold, who said, "President Jacobsen was impressed with you, and he said that I could allow you to come."

I went and had a wonderful experience back there. I played Samuel the Lamanite.

Oaks: Really?

Whitman: I think that's what I played that year. I went several years, and was Dr. Hansen's assistant for one or two years. I don't remember the exact details.

I really was enamored of the Church. I bore my testimony when I was out there, before I was a member of the Church. I even have a picture of myself when I stood in the Sacred Grove. Along the line, some very special missionaries had been chosen for me to live with. There was a really short, kind of insignificant, missionary, and I was a lot taller than he was. He looked up at me, and I don't remember exactly what was said, but it amounted to being asked if I'd be baptized.

I said, "I really can't. I made a promise to my mother that I wouldn't do anything that would cause my father to start drinking again." My dad had been an alcoholic for a long time.

This missionary said, "Do you trust your Heavenly Father?"

I said, "Yes."

He said, "Well, why don't you put everything in his hands, other than the things you need to do. See if he won't take care of your dad, and don't you try to take care of him."

I said, "Okay." I immediately went to the mission president, President Jacobsen, and said, "I want to be baptized, and I want to be baptized in the Susquehanna River."

He said, "I think what you need to do is to go back to Provo, and make sure that this is what you want to do. Let it not be something that's emotional just because of the pageant."

I was disappointed, because I wanted to be baptized in the Susquehanna River, but I said, "Okay." I was baptized in September of that year.

Oaks: Do you remember what year that was?

Whitman: I can't remember the exact date. It was September, I know that.

Then I graduated from BYU. I was in lots of shows, lots of different shows. I graduated with my bachelor's in '57 and my master's in '58.

Then I went to the Cleveland Playhouse and was there for a season. I had a wonderful experience. Harold Hansen was instrumental in my getting there too, because he had acted there under the McConnells, a long time before. He called and I was hired as an apprentice—I think that's what it was called. I worked on props as well as being in the apprentice roles and such. I had some good roles when I was back there.

Oaks: Then what was next?

Whitman: While I was there, I met some wonderful people. One of them was Ronnie Claire Edwards, who's done a lot of stuff since that time. She was one of their lead actresses, and for some reason, we became good friends. It was not romantic in any way, we were just really good friends. She's from the South, and maybe that's what it was, I don't know.

She started telling me about Paul Baker from the Dallas Theater Center, and how he was going to come through and audition her. She urged me to audition for him. I did, and I don't know if he gave us a contract or what, but he accepted both of us into that program. We were the first year at the new Dallas Theater Center. Frank Lloyd Wright had designed the theatre. A dreadful design.

While I was there, one night there was a whole group of the apprentices sitting around chit-chatting. I think I was bemoaning the fact that I was lonely. Nancy Pinkerton—I don't know that she's famous or has done much since she left there or not—she was the odd thing there.

She said, "Well, you just need to get married."

I said, "I have no idea who I would marry."

They started grilling me on who I'd dated and all of that. The name that kept coming up was Dorothy Whitaker, a costume designer at the Y. We were really good friends, but we'd never dated. We went to shows together; she'd pay her way and I'd pay my way, and we'd go as groups and do stuff.

It was Nancy Pinkerton, I think, who was the instigator. She said, "Well, I think you ought to call her and propose."

I took my coin purse out and said, "Look. That's how much money I've got. I haven't got enough money to make a long distance telephone call."

So all the kids around the table put their money down, and I went over to a pay phone and called Dorothy. She was just running out the door to a dress rehearsal of Yul Brenner's show *The King and I*. Lael Woodbury was directing it, and she was having a horrible time.

She said, "Well, what do you want? I'm rushing out the door. I've got to get to a rehearsal."

I chit-chatted and chit-chatted and the operator came on and said, "Your minutes are up." Somebody quick put some money down.

I flipped that in and I said, "Would you marry me?"

She said, "Are you drunk?" It went on like that, but finally she said, "Look, if you still feel this way tomorrow, write me a letter."

That started that.

Then I got wind of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. I decided I wanted to go there during the summer. I don't remember how I auditioned, whether I did a tape or not. Angus Bowmer was the head of it at that time. I think I got a telegram, and I had to reply immediately if I would accept, with the pittance they paid.

I accepted that, and on the way home, all sorts of things were happening. I was going to hitchhike—that's what I'd planned on doing: hitchhiking back to Oregon. I honestly don't remember how I got back to Provo, because I went to Provo first. I don't know whether Dorothy sent me money or not. I think I was in Provo a couple of days or so, and it could be that I stayed on 7th North, where I had roomed all the time I was at BYU. It was the parents of my first roommate, Sam Melville and Jessie May. I probably stayed at their place because they were really good to me.

Anyway, I didn't stay in Provo very long, and then I went on to Oregon. That was the summer, I believe, that Fred Adams brought Dorothy up to the Shakespeare Festival. Fred went to some rehearsals while he was there. I remember one afternoon he had a humongous measuring tape, and he started measuring while the rehearsal was going on—the stage and everything. I had gotten special permission for him to come in and observe the rehearsal, and I thought, *Oh my goodness, what are you doing, Fred?*

Afterwards I said, "What are you doing going all over measuring everything?"

He said, "Well, I'm measuring it so I can go down to Cedar City and build a Shakespeare Festival. I'm going to start the Utah Shakespeare Festival."

For a long time, Fred used to tell that story over and over to people—that if it hadn't have been for Dorothy and me, he would probably never have started the Shakespeare Festival.

Oaks: He got the idea by going up and seeing that festival?

Whitman: Yes. So I went to the Festival that year, then we went from there.

Oaks: When did you get married to Dorothy?

Whitman: That summer, at the end of that season. We were married in the Manti Temple. By that time, Paul Baker had also accepted Dorothy as part of the first company as an actress and as the assistant

costumer for the shows. As soon as we got through the temple, we drove, pulling a trailer, down to Dallas and lived in an apartment there.

The people in Dallas were just wonderful. The ward was fabulous. We had a wonderful time and loved the experience as it started out. Quickly—I won't go into the details—Paul Baker became paranoid for some reason; he was afraid someone was after him and was going to kill him. He started living in the front room of the scene designer's place. So little by little the company was doing strange things, and people started leaving the company.

Dorothy and I talked and talked about it. It was not a healthy environment to be in. I wrote a letter—we didn't make telephone calls back then—to Harold.

Harold said, "I don't think you should leave. I think you should stick it out, so that you've gone all the way through."

But it became impossible for Dorothy. She was assigned to do costumes and such, but no materials were being given to her, and the director wouldn't chat with her about the show. There was nothing.

Paul's favorite statement was, "Just hang loose." That's the way he directed, that's the way he maneuvered.

Dorothy said, "I just can't do this."

John Cullum was one of our best friends there, and I think he left the company, and so did Ronnie Claire Edwards, I believe.

There was another woman who thought the world of Paul Baker, but she said, "He's not healthy to be around anymore. We need to get out of this." I cannot remember her name—anyway, she left.

We finally turned in our resignation.

Harold said, "If you do leave, make sure you have a letter of recommendation that is positive."

I still have a copy of the letter, and it says something about how much he appreciated working with us, and "We wish you Godspeed," or something like that.

So we moved to Salt Lake City, and I worked for Redwood Nursery. It was the hardest work I have ever done, but I must have been good at it because when I was ready to leave and go back to the Oregon Shakespeare Festival that summer, Redwood did everything they could to try and keep me. They wanted me to be one of the Straw Bosses, or whatever it was called.

I said, "No, I can't wait to get away from here."

So we went to the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, and it was while I was there that year—Dorothy was pregnant—that I decided there is no way I would be able to earn enough acting to even pay for the doctor's bill; I think the doctor's bill was \$300 or something.

We talked and I said, "The only thing I could do is teach. I think I could do a good job of that."

I contacted a Utah State school superintendent or someone, and luckily he said, "There is one position, and it's in Beaver, Utah. You would teach one speech and drama class, one Spanish class, two sophomore English classes, a junior English class, and a senior English class."

Oaks: Good grief.

Whitman: I said, "Sure."

So I went down to Beaver, Utah. They actually had to get a substitute teacher for two weeks, maybe longer than that, before the season was over. The school was willing to do that.

In the Spanish class, I was able to stay about two lessons ahead of the students. I had good pronunciation, and I'd had one class in high school, and I think I had a class at BYU. We had a wonderful time. We had a Spanish club, and did a Spanish evening for the community. We had a good time.

In the English classes, the kids did well. I only had one problem: one kid kept putting gum in the pencil sharpener. I turned around and thought, *Okay, it happens every time I turn and write anything on the blackboard.*

I let my eye look over the whole class, and I said, “Okay, I’m going to turn around and I’m going to write on the board until I hear somebody cough, at which time I’m going to turn around and assume that the gum is no longer in the machine, and that it will never be there again.”

I did, and after I turned around and went back, it was gone. I was tall, I guess, and I had a gruff voice; I don’t know what did it, but that took care of it.

I stayed there, and I would have stayed teaching high school the rest of my life. I don’t know whether it was the principal or the superintendent that said, “We want you to stay in the worst sort of way, but you have to get a teaching certificate, because you just got a proviso teaching, even though you have a master’s degree.”

I said, “Okay, what classes do I have to take?” They started telling me the classes I had to take, and I said, “No, thank you, I couldn’t possibly take any of that Mickey Mouse stuff.”

So the superintendent called me in and said, “We want you to stay, but we don’t have any control over this. However, there are enough people that have taken correspondence courses—the kind of courses that you’d have to take—and you can just use their material and mail it in. You’d just have to pay for the course, you wouldn’t have to do it.”

I thought, *Do you really mean what you’re saying? You feel the same way about the courses that I do.*

I said, “You know, I don’t think that’s right. I guess I’m not supposed to stay here.”

I started searching for a graduate school to go to, and I was accepted at Minnesota.

Oaks: Did you talk to H. I. about that?

Whitman: I cannot remember the details. I’m sure I must have said something to him about it. I asked him what were the best schools or something. I forget which schools there were other than Minnesota, but there were probably four schools that had accepted me. When it came right down to it, you had to do doctoral dissertations for all of them. I thought, *I don’t want to do a doctoral dissertation unless it’s creative.*

Minnesota told me I could do a creative doctoral dissertation, but when I got there I was told, “No you can’t do a creative doctoral dissertation. Whoever told you that was wrong.”

Anyway, I got there and I taught—wait, I went to BYU that summer and passed off either French or Spanish, I don’t remember which one it was. I think it was Spanish. So when I went to Minnesota, I had one language down, and I only had to do French after that.

I went to Minnesota, and I had an assistantship in the General College. I taught various classes—they were called speech classes, but you could tailor them to almost anything you wanted. Mine always were twisted over into the other. Frank Whiting was the chairman of the department, and when he stepped down as chairman of the department, the man who was my committee chairman, Ken Graham, took that position.

Shortly after school had started, he called me in and said, “I know you have an assistantship over in the General College, but I’ve got to have somebody that’s going to be my assistant.” He gave me children’s theatre and creative dramatics; I think that’s all it was that semester. He said, “I think you’re the person that’s supposed to do it.”

I ended up teaching almost a full load, because he never came to class. I was teaching a graduate class in children’s theatre—I think it was a graduate class—and creative dramatics was an undergraduate class. So I had a lot of teaching experience, and most of it was relatively good. We had to direct—Harold, did we have to direct two plays while we were there?

Oaks: You had to direct at least one. You could have had to do two.

Whitman: I think I did two plays. The first one I did was an original script of David Wright’s, who was from Bennington, Idaho: *Still the Mountain Wind*. It had been done in its original form at Utah State University. Because of that show, he and I became good friends, and later on, I adapted one of his short stories, *Speak Ye Tenderly of Kings*, into a show that was done on KBYU-TV and a couple other places.

Also, I got the first F I’d ever received at the University of Minnesota, in Scandinavian Drama.

It could have been a D, but I think it was an F. It didn't count, whatever it was—I did all of the work, but the professor didn't like my final paper. The paper was on Brand; I took a very Christian approach to it and he was just furious. So he gave me an F.

Oaks: For the whole course, not just for the paper?

Whitman: Yes, for the whole course. I wasn't stellar to begin with, but my mind didn't think like they thought. I was looking at my grades not too long ago from there. I got A's and B+'s in everything except Scandinavian Drama.

Oaks: Was that your minor?

Whitman: That was one of my minors. I had that and Greek Drama. I did fine in Greek Drama.

I finished all my coursework at the University, and the next year I started teaching acting for Ken Graham, because he was supposed to be teaching acting classes. The University of Minnesota was very good to me. I was able to teach almost a full load. I don't know how much money I made; I looked at my first contract at BYU, and I couldn't believe how little money I got. I can't remember exactly, maybe \$8,000 for the year?

Oaks: That would have been about it. When did you go to BYU? You left from Minnesota and went to Sacramento, right? When did you go to Sacramento?

Whitman: One summer before I finished my course work, Beverly Warner was at Minnesota in costumes. She knew somebody at Chico State College who needed a replacement for the summer, so I went to Chico State College for the summer as a guest professor. I costumed the show and taught children's theatre and creative dramatics for that summer. Dorothy and the children went first to Southern Utah and stayed with her folks for a short time, and then went to Montpelier and stayed with my folks. I don't know why we didn't all go to Chico. You think back and you think, *Why didn't I do this? Why didn't I do that?* I don't know.

Along the way—I'll bring this in—Dorothy was expecting our second child, and it was my responsibility, as it grew close to time for Kendal to be born, to arrange for a babysitter to come if we happened to need to go to the hospital. I put it off and I put it off and I put it off, and finally when Dorothy started having labor pains, I thought, *Oh my goodness, what am I going to do? I don't have anybody to take care of the baby.*

So I called Virginia [Oaks], who must have said, "Bring him over here." That was Ty that went over to your house and stayed the night. Kendal was born in St. Paul at the hospital there.

I came back and finished whatever classes I needed to. I think I was at Minnesota for three years. I'm not positive about that. Then when I left there, I had lots of friends from the Shakespeare Festival, and one of them taught school at Sacramento State College, in Sacramento, California.

Somehow or other, he contacted me and said, "Are you about ready to leave your program?"

I said, "Yes."

"Well, would you come here and take over my responsibilities for the year? I'm going on sabbatical."

So I went there, and we lived on Patricia Way, and we had a wonderful year there. Again, they wanted me to stay, but the position they thought they were going to get didn't come through.

I started hunting for a job, and I got an offer at the University of Texas. I was one of the last of their candidates, so I went down and interviewed, and I had hardly gotten back home when I got a telephone call from them saying the job was mine. It was as an assistant professor, and was good pay.

Dorothy and I talked about it, and all of a sudden, both of us said, "You know, I don't think we're supposed to go there." Whether it was because of Dorothy's mother's health or something else, I don't know.

I called Harold Hansen and said, “Is there any chance that you know of any jobs around someplace in Utah?”

He said, “Jobs are at a premium, you better take that job in Texas.”

I said, “Well, Dorothy and I do not feel good about doing it. I think I’m going to turn it down.”

“I think you’re making a mistake.”

“Okay, well, thanks a lot.”

We talked some more, and we all must have prayed about it. Then we got on the phone and called Texas. I thanked them profusely—I did have a wonderful time down there. It was a great school, a great opportunity.

I said, “Thanks, but we just won’t be able to do it.”

I called Harold back and said, “Well, Harold”—I don’t know if I called him Harold or H.I.—it was Dr. Hansen, probably. “You’ve got to find me a job.”

Of course, he had baptized me, so he was kind of like a father figure to me.

I don’t know what we did for a couple of weeks of still teaching in Sacramento. I directed a couple of shows there: *Long Day’s Journey into Night* and something else. But it wasn’t too long until Harold called back.

He said, “Well, you’re in luck. A position has opened at BYU, and I’m willing to put your name in for it.”

I guess the faculty were not at all pleased that Harold bypassed everybody else and didn’t go through the proper procedure of hunting for a candidate or anything.

He said, “You need to go to Salt Lake City to be interviewed, and if a General Authority approves you, then you’re in.”

I went in and had a wonderful talk with LeGrand Richards—a sweet, sweet man.

He said something like, “I don’t see any reason why you shouldn’t be teaching down there at BYU. I think people would be impressed.” He was just as sweet as can be.

So I started teaching at BYU; that was in 1965. I taught for thirty years and retired in '95.

When I got there, I expected to be assigned all sorts of plays to direct, since that’s what I did well. My first year, the department was starting new plays, and I was assigned to direct a new play, and my budget was \$50 for everything. *Everything*. I was also assigned to direct the opera, and I would have three casts in the opera. I directed *Carmen*.

Let me see. [Looking through a book of collected programs and newspapers.] *Greater Crown*, by Martin Alder, was the first show I directed at BYU.

Oaks: Edward Hart wrote the review? Wow.

Whitman: He really liked me.

Oaks: I really liked him. I had him as a faculty member at BYU.

Whitman: In this picture is Tristan Randall Peeko, and Tristan Turner Whitman is named for him. I was out in California to speak at his missionary farewell, and that’s when Matthew passed away. So when Tristan was born after Matthew’s death, we decided we wanted to name him Tristan.

Then I directed the *Trojan Women*, for a high school workshop. I started a high school workshop, I guess, the first year I was at BYU. I did that for twenty-five years, sometimes twice a summer. I enjoyed doing it, primarily to earn more money. It was hard those first years at BYU.

The first show that I ever directed, Barta Heiner was in it. I saw her in a high school production for the Utah Thespian Association or something, when BYU hosted it. I saw her in that, and gave her a scholarship to the first workshop. A lot of good people came through that first year—let me see who else was on that list. Eric Fielding was there, and Tris R. Kendal was in the show. Shannon Woodbury, Dr. Woodbury’s daughter, passed away. Barta Heinen—look, her name is spelled wrong. Jerry Weeks, I don’t

know if you remember him or not. Beverly Warner did costumes. Lee Wright was the technical director. I don't know what Lee's doing now.

Oaks: He's still there.

Whitman: Mary Jo Cunningham—do you remember Mary Jo?

Oaks: Yes. This first theatre workshop was in 1966.

Whitman: That would be right, because it would have been the summer after I'd gotten there. This was one of mine—I guess you would have said I was the acting coach for *Coat of Many Colors*. That was Tristan Peeko right there; that's him again.

Then I directed *Lockmate*, and that's the show that Clayne Robison met his wife in. He played the lead. Sara Lee Gibb was the choreographer. Bev Warner did costumes. Chuck Henson—look how young and handsome he was. Bob Struthers, bless his heart, and Don Earl, and Brad Curtis. Brad and I never really clicked.

Oaks: And that's you!

Whitman: That's me. I had a crew cut then.

Oaks: Sara Lee Gibb is the chair of the Dance Department now. They've combined.

Whitman: Actually she's retired.

Oaks: Well, she was just before.

Whitman: Right. We saw her last year. She's really courted Barbra because she was trying to get money to try and build a theatre.

That's another show I did, *The Dragon*.

Oaks: This is a beautiful book.

Whitman: I've got five or six of these. This paper here is granting BYU Broadcast Services the right to broadcast via television, on KBYU, *Speaking Tenderly of Kings*. David Wright was deceased, and he died tragically—something took him just like that. He was a fabulous writer, a really lovely writer.

Warren Wright was the guardian of his estate, and for a while he gave us a rough time, but he finally approved. That was the first script I ever wrote under, at BYU.

Anyway, I directed two, three, sometimes four, shows a year at BYU.

Oaks: This book is the kind of thing that would be fantastic in the archive.

Whitman: I know, but they're not going to get it for a long, long time.

Oaks: That's fine. But eventually, I think it would be great.

Whitman: This one had so many good people. Craig Costello, Frank E. Fox, JB Williams. JB still writes me, and I get a Christmas card from him every year. He lives in Florida. Bless his heart, he tried to live a straight life, but he didn't make it.

This was by the playwright Doug Stewart, *A Day, a Night and a Day*. I don't know how many productions were done—my goodness, we did it year after year. Then it went up to Salt Lake, I think.

That is Jerold Pearson. It was an exciting experience—I mean, the play is flawed, I know that, but at the time it created much excitement about new scripts.

We have the newspapers in here, and I even put in people who hated shows. Also letters that were written to the president of the University about how I was going to corrupt all of them.

This was from a Mutual Improvement Association: “In our opinion, *A Day, A Night and a Day* is an exceptionally fine play. It was enjoyed and appreciated both in reading it and seeing the BYU production.” Who signed that? Florence Jacobsen! And Carlos Smith.

Oaks: Touring Reparatory Theatre: *A Day, a Night and a Day* was in that.

Whitman: Yes, it was *Romeo and Juliet*; *A Day, a Night and a Day*; and *The Ugly Princess*.

For the first production we did, the makeup took hours to get ready, so they were done like they were tattoos.

It was the fourth sellout. “For the fourth time in two years, Doug’s Stewart’s powerful play will be presented in the Margetts.”

What is that gal’s name? She was a Jewish girl, Carol Ann Shuster. She joined the Church.

We obviously had more than fifty dollars that year.

Oaks: Well, the budgets did increase. These books have all the shows you did?

Whitman: Yes.

Oaks: That’s great. Mine have not been quite that well preserved.

Whitman: I need to do a book on shows that I’ve written that others have directed. The only show I wrote and directed myself was the last show I did, *Montpelier Farewell*. Orson Scott Card wanted me to write it as a short story, or a medium short story. I did and sent it to him, but I don’t think it was very good—I don’t know how to describe things. I’m better with dialogue, I think, than I am with narrative.

Oaks: Who were teachers that you worked with at BYU, and some of your fellow students?

Whitman: Let’s see. Leia Woodbury was one of the teachers; Harold Hansen was one of the teachers; Gledhill was one of the teachers. Mrs. Pardoe was there, but I didn’t have any classes from her, which I regret. I had a certain prejudice against what she was teaching, but I wish I’d had a class from her, because I understand she was a lovely teacher. I can’t think of the little man that taught playwriting.

Oaks: Playwriting?

Whitman: He did children’s theatre.

Oaks: Albert Mitchell?

Whitman: Yes! I had my first playwriting class from Albert Mitchell.

Oaks: Most of these were still there when you came back as a faculty member.

Whitman: They were, yes.

I should mention my doctoral dissertation at the University of Minnesota; I was not allowed to do a creative one.

When I first got there, and found out they weren't going to let me do that, I said, "Well, what if I do a history of the Hill Cumorah Pageant from the beginning up to, I think, 1957, and an analysis of the scripts that were done during the year?"

Graham said, "Oh, no, we wouldn't want you to do something like that." As time went on and we got closer to the time when I had to choose something for a dissertation, he called me in and said, "I've had the most wonderful idea. You know how you've got that pageant your Church has done up in New York? Has a history ever been done of that?"

I said, "No."

"Well, I think that's what you should do your dissertation on."

So I did. It was a very incomplete history, because I could not get the cooperation to find everything that was necessary. Even after I got to BYU and Harold promised me that he would open up all of his files of stuff—I guess he did open up all of his files to me, but it was like pulling teeth to get the information. So I finished it and passed what I needed to, but it was certainly was not complete at all.

Let's see if I can think of anyone else that was at BYU. People that were there when I was a student: Chuck Henson was, and I believe Lee Walker was, but I can't remember for sure.

There was a Hawaiian fellow that played Jigger in the musical *Carousel*. What was his name? It's a famous Hawaiian name—Blaisdell! He was a handsome guy. When I first went over to Hawaii, I could not find him, and then I found somebody that was connected with the family. He had died. I don't remember any of the details, but that name is famous over there because one of the big theatres in Honolulu is the Blaisdell Theatre.

I think that, by and large, *Carousel* was the first musical done at BYU. The drama students were quite disappointed, because Harold had cast all music majors—he went for singers instead of people that could act. I'm trying to think of the lady that played the lead.

Oaks: Ellison's the last name—Sarah?

Whitman: Her brother, Jerry Ellison, was in theatre, too. She was in music, but he was in theatre. He taught and directed theatre for years in Orem.

Oaks: Did you do professional work outside of BYU? You've talked about that for before you came. Did you do any additional after you came to BYU?

Whitman: I had quite a few opportunities to do things outside of BYU, and at first when I was offered to do something, and then would take it to the administration, it would never leave the department. They didn't want me to do anything outside.

Oaks: Who was your administrator?

Whitman: It was Lael Woodbury. I have a long letter that he wrote to me explaining why he didn't want that. The offer was to direct a show in the theatre in Orem.

Oaks: You couldn't go even out there to do it?

Whitman: No. I tried for a long time to get opportunities outside, but they all seemed to be turned down. I stopped trying. But I did direct something—I'm not remembering the name—up in Salt Lake City. It was connected with the Church, and perhaps that's why I was allowed to do it. The book was written by Doug Stewart, and I don't remember who wrote the music. We had two casts; I directed the Salt Lake cast, and somebody else was directing a cast down in southern California. It was an original script, about some centennial something or other. It was patriotic in nature.

Then there was a show I wrote when several of us were asked to submit proposals. I submitted a proposal, and it was the one that was accepted. Merrill Bradshaw wrote the music for it. Then I was

granted a sabbatical leave, and I went to Idaho to write another script. When I left, I thought Ivan Crosland was going to direct the show, but he didn't. Somebody else directed it, and they did strange things—like instead of casting a little boy in the show, it was a little girl, so the dialogue I wrote for a boy was said by a girl. It didn't make sense. It was not a wonderful experience.

Oaks: What content and curriculum did you teach when you started, and after some years?

Whitman: For a while I was teaching children's theatre and creating dramatics. The only thing that I taught the entire thirty years was different classes in acting. There was always a beginning acting class, and then as time went on, sometimes I'd teach beginning, second, third. Then we started the one that ended up being the beginning of the Music Dance Theatre Program. They had to do one or two musical scenes. For a while I was also head of the directing program. When I went on semester abroad, I taught history, but I didn't usually teach history. That was not one of my fortes.

Oaks: When did you start doing playwriting?

Whitman: Shortly after I came to BYU. I can't tell you without going back and hunting through dates when it started. We had some wonderful plays that came out of that. I don't know that much has happened to any of them. One that has turned out, of course, is Orson Scott Card, one of the foremost science fiction writers in the world. He published *Stone Tables* as a script, and then he did it as a story. I think he dedicated that to me; and the second volume of the Alvin Maker series he dedicated to me and two other teachers.

It's an interesting thing—and I think this is worth saying—Scott was not an easy student to have in a class because he was smarter than most of the teachers, certainly smarter than I am. If you did not allow yourself to be cowed by that, but you allowed him to maintain his creative mind and what have you, he was able to learn from you, and we clicked. I know that certain faculty members were up in arms if they found his name in a class they were going to have. He was a difficult student.

Oaks: He was extremely bright and capable.

Whitman: Yes. My goodness, the breadth of what he can write. I'm reading one of his books right now. I'm so far behind—I try to keep up with the students that have written books. The thing I wanted to emphasize was that we can't turn that kind of a student off, or we will not have any kind of influence upon them. We can have an influence upon them, probably for good, if we will try and allow their way of learning not to disrupt the rest of the class.

Scott and I had, for four years, I guess, a wonderful relationship. He's not a great actor, but a good actor. I loved to have him in class after I learned how to work with him. He was exciting to have because when somebody else had written a play, he always had wonderful things to say; he was very positive, not a negative person at all. I sometimes think that the things he had to say were more important than the things that I said about scripts.

Oaks: The thing I found during that period of time was a creative energy in the department that was just explosive.

Whitman: Yes.

Oaks: We produced a whole series of new plays that were exciting. They were all over the place. We had comedies that were coming out regularly, in addition to pieces like *Stone Tables*.

Whitman: Right, and *Fires of the Mind*. What an exciting play. I don't know what's happened now. Do they have playwriting at the Y?

Oaks: They do. They're not doing a whole lot with it; they don't have the kind of excitement that we had then. That's the thing.

Whitman: That's too bad. I didn't do any of the technical teaching at BYU. When I was a guest someplace else and was teaching it, I made it through on pure bravado.

Oaks: You did design the costumes for one show.

Whitman: I did, and they were fine. But it was: "What have we got in the costume shop that will fit you?"

I've worked in the costume shop enough, mostly volunteering, to help people when they got in a bind. I did a lot with Oregon Shakespeare Festival, making boots and all sorts of things. I was around costumes a lot.

Oaks: Did you do the set as well when you were teaching high school down in Beaver?

Whitman: Yes, you did everything when you taught high school. It was so exciting, and it's exciting now to go down and see shows that my daughter Kim has directed in St. George. The school she's in now was being built when she first went down there. She really liked the first school that she taught at, and the assistant principal was going to be the new principal of that new school.

He said, "I'd like you to come over and be the drama person over there."

She said, "Well, I'm not sure I want to leave here."

"Look, the theatre hasn't been built yet. If you come over, you can tell them what you want on the stage and in the scene shop, and you can also designate a room that's going to be a little theatre."

So she said, "Okay." She went over and oh, what a plan she's got. Now she has twenty-four body mics, and everything else that goes with it.

Oaks: She must have a really great program.

Whitman: She does have a good program. Sometimes the shows are better than others, because of who's in them or how things click. We just saw *The Wizard of Oz* down there. It was such a good show; it was a high school show, but it was good.

Oaks: Do you have a list of your creative work? You obviously do in a scrapbook—let it be on record that I encouraged you to donate it when you are through with it.

What would you say were some of the most significant things that happened during your thirty years at BYU?

Whitman: The first thing was certainly the playwriting program. It was an exciting period of time, not just in theatre, but in the arts in general. There was a burgeoning of—oh, I don't know. It was an exciting time to be there. So many people contributed, and they organized firesides.

Oaks: It seemed to correlate, at least a little bit, with the Mormon Festival of Arts.

Whitman: I'm sure that had an effect.

Oaks: I think it was the whole feeling of focusing the arts on the Church, and on sharing that message; I'm finding that as I'm looking at historical material.

Whitman: I think that's true. I think the acting program continued to grow and grow and grow and grow, and it got better year after year. I think that was a steady thing.

I think that the next thing I was involved with that I was really pleased with was the Music Dance Theatre program. It was hard to get it started—we had representatives from the Music Department, the Dance Department, and the Theatre Department. I think I'm saying correctly that of the original representatives, I was the only one that stayed; the other departments changed, and so on.

The time that was most flourishing was towards the end of when I was there—it was me, and Pat Debenham from the Dance Department, and Randy Boothe from Young Ambassadors and the Music Department. We had tremendous support from Newell Dayley. He was behind it 100%, and so was Dean Mason and—I'm trying to think of his name. He was in the music department, and then he passed away. Clyn Barrus—he was really, really, really helpful. It seemed for a while like there was almost nothing we could ask for that wasn't somehow made to materialize to make the program grow.

When we decided that we wanted to, in a sense, compete—but only compete to have the finest program we could—I would assume it was the dean that came up with the money, I don't remember. Maybe I never knew who came up with the money. But it allowed me—I don't know whether others went with me, but I believe it was just me—I picked out four, five, or six different schools in America, and I went to each one of them. I spent some time there, and interviewed people, and usually saw a production. That way I came up with: *Okay, the best program in the nation is such and such, and this and this contributed to the growth.*

Then I remember going to the Rocky Mountain Theatre Conference in Denver, Colorado, where Jan Sullivan did a workshop. She was teaching how to sing and belt correctly, so that it would not hurt your voice.

I was so enamored with what she was doing that I immediately contacted somebody in the music department and said, "We've got to at least have her here as a guest."

It was Clayne Robison I talked to, and he was just not interested at all. He didn't think it was something their department could support. So the theatre department brought her in. She did workshops, and Clayne and I attended the same workshop and learned how to belt together.

I think it was Randy that saw her and knew what she had, and knew how important it was to our program to get her. So she came back a second time as a guest, I believe, and then the Music Department hired her. She passed away last year; she had lupus and a lot of other things. We tried to stay in touch. They had a condominium over in Hawaii, and we would try to sometimes connect when we were there. The last time we connected was two years ago, and she was really suffering; she was having a hard time. I thought he was in rougher condition than she was, though. Then I got a letter this year from her son telling of her passing and the celebration they were having for her.

Oaks: I helped bring her in as an administrator on the theatre side.

Whitman: Right. As I say, I would get these harebrained ideas. I don't remember any of the names, but there was a Hawaiian falsetto singer, and I said, "This is something we need to at least be aware of, whether our kids do anything with it or not." We brought him in, and he was wonderful at what he was doing.

Oaks: For what he was doing, he was great. Are there any other students that you want to mention who graduated and are now continuing to work in the field?

Whitman: Well, it's tragic, of course, that so many of them that had no idea they had problems of identity—I don't know how to kindly say what I want to say.

Randy would know a whole lot more than I do about who's gone on and what they're doing and so on—after I left BYU, I made a decision that I was not going to hang on, as I had seen previous faculty members try to do, and dwindle and dwindle and dwindle. When I left Provo, I severed. I still communicated with people, but I'd decided.

First I thought when I came out here, *Well, maybe I'll stay involved in theatre.* Then I saw the kind of theatre that was being done around here, and I decided I didn't want to spend my time doing that. I

decided to spend all of my time working on whatever the Church wanted me to do—in particular, I finished a Whitman History; and that's what I've continued to do. I try almost every week to work on something or other that's in writing. When I'm in Hawaii, I usually paint. I have paints and stuff left over there.

Another question you had was whether I've done any public speaking. No. For years and years and years I taught the Gospel Doctrine in Sunday School, and finally I said to the bishop, "You know, I'd love to continue teaching this class, but certainly there are others that the Lord would love to have the opportunity." Swiftly after that, I got released.

I guess one thing that's theatre-connected that I've done is with a group in the Sacramento area that's called the Take Note Troupe. They're high school kids; it's a group led by mothers, bless their hearts, to give the kids a theatre experience that's a wholesome one. One of the mothers was a daughter of a very close friend of ours, and lives a couple blocks away. She called and asked if I would possibly do a workshop or something for them if they came down. I don't know how many years ago that was, probably four years ago, maybe more than that. So usually about twice a year, they'll come down here, and I'll do what's turned into coaching. They're usually working on a Shakespearian show, and they'll come prepared to do something, and I'll work with them on whatever it is.

Oaks: Both acting and directing?

Whitman: Yes, and we've clicked; the connection is very good, and it's a very spiritual experience. They have shot way up, apparently, and they say it's because of what I've been teaching them—but maybe it's just that I've given them hope, or helped them find the hope within themselves. They always go to the Shakespeare Festival in Cedar City, and they have garnered all sorts of lovely accolades there.

One of the girls—and I'll not remember her name, Florence is their last name—she's played leads at BYU now in several musicals, and I just heard that she is the lead in a Broadway touring show. She's married, and her husband also has a position in that show. I always worry about her going to New York. Oh, so many of them have fallen. Anyway, that's been a very nice experience.

Oaks: Is there anything you think the faculty at BYU should be doing now or focusing on?

Whitman: Well, I'm so far removed from it I don't really know what they are doing. I hear that they're doing lovely things in film, and getting junior kudos or whatever they're called. I know that from the standpoint of several students who went through the film portion of our department during the time I was there. They felt like they were in competition with the faculty members, and that the faculty members were not behind them trying to help them foster. Most of those students are individuals who have gone elsewhere, and they've been in master's programs, and they have felt that degree of camaraderie and what have you.

I don't know whether you knew it, but Tristan is at USC teaching graduate cinematography.

Oaks: Really? Great!

Whitman: He teaches two or three classes, then he does freelance work on the outside. I'm not sure how long he's been teaching there, for quite a while, and he's now the coordinator of the assignments of teachers in the area that he's in. He's not a full-time faculty member, though. I think it's called an adjunct—well we would call it adjunct; they've got all sorts of strange names for faculty in California. They keep promising that as soon as a position opens up, he'll get it. It's interesting: there you never mention that you're LDS, you never mention anything.

When he was hired, the woman that hired him—she's still the head of that area—really took a liking to him and told him, "I will never say anything negative about your faith, but I must ask you never to let it be known. There will be those who do know, but you must never let it be known that you're LDS."

Oaks: Because of prejudice and feelings.

Whitman: Yes.

Oaks: I think that's true in the industry generally now.

Whitman: Yes, unfortunately. You know, he and Charles Oliver did a film called *Take*. It's a beautiful film. It was to be rated PG-13, and when the rating board found out that they were LDS, they rated it R.

Oaks: Just for spite?

Whitman: They went back and they tried to see what they could do to make it PG-13.

“That's what we've promised people; that's what we want. Our backers are backing a show that is a PG rated show.”

They said, “There's absolutely nothing you can do.”

Oaks: Well, thank you, Chuck. This has been wonderful. I really have enjoyed it.